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PCBs: The first decision

12/03/00

THE UNANSWERED questions regarding PCBs on, or spread from, the former General Electric medium-transformers plant in Rome are many and unlikely to have a quick answer or resolution. There is one aspect, however, that can and should be settled as soon as possible. The GE property on Redmond Circle is the largest single industrial site in Floyd County. Originally on the outskirts of Rome (actually, when first built the plant was in the unincorporated area) it is now almost in the heart of the city. Will most of it now be forever shuttered and surrounded by barbed wire or is there a chance to restore it and recycle it into a contributor to the local economy? At a recent public hearing on polychlorinated biphenyl pollution, a company representative pledged that GE had no intention of abandoning the community as it faces this pollution problem and "we will be here for the long term." That's good to hear but no less than should be expected of a responsible member of the corporate sector.

INDEED, THE COMPANY'S proposed method of handling PCBs — trapping them permanently on the site and indefinitely monitoring the situation — led to this exchange: "So GE will be here to Kingdom Come?" asked one resident. "That's correct," responded Gary Sheffer, a GE spokesman from company headquarters. Kingdom Come, with apologies to those who believe the Second Coming is almost at hand, could be a very, very long time. Some in the audience suggested that GE abandon its primary cleanup method, with which state environmental experts largely do not agree, and not try to only contain the PCBs to the site. Rather, there appears to be sentiment that GE dig up its old landfill areas and cart the PCBs to some place far, far away from Rome. Indeed, the County Commission has already drafted a letter advocating this course and is seeking support from the City Commission and chamber of commerce. This is a fundamental question that needs speedy resolution.

LET'S ASSUME that expense is not the issue here. GE can certainly afford to do almost anything to make Rome whole again and to protect its residents. However, it would be interesting to see a cost comparison for monitoring the status quo "forever" versus digging the stuff up and burying it in a hazardous waste landfill. Which raises an important point. If dug up, the PCBs have to be put into a special landfill in Alabama designed to hold such material. If they stay here, then Rome has got a hazardous waste landfill in the heart of town, unusable as anything else, until

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University of Georgia
president Michael Adams
was justified in firing
head football coach Jim
Donnan.

Strongly Agree ☐ 22%
Agree ☐ 22%
Disagree ☐ 45%
Strongly Disagree ☐ 12%

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"Kingdom Come." It also means that, while GE will certainly pay property taxes on it forever, much of this land can never again be used to create jobs and dollars for the economy, nor even turned into a public park. No doubt, as GE will probably argue, there is some peril to stirring up the PCBs in order to remove them while, so long as they are already buried and if they can be kept out of the groundwater, it is may be safer to let them be.

YET, IF THIS IS the choice — and it is GE's choice at the moment it also means that this community must largely write off this large area on a key transportation corridor and in close proximity to major retailing, industrial and residential areas. Perhaps the argument could and should be made that if GE wants to follow its own best instincts on the matter it should somehow make Rome "whole" for the loss of such valuable property. The site once supported about 2,000 jobs. What are those worth? It once contributed far more property taxes than it does today as the facility is largely mothballed and its taxable heavy equipment has been removed. How much does that loss amount to and should GE be held responsible for making the tax coffers whole? It was once a strong talking point for local economic developers, in wooing new industry, to point to the presence of such a prestigious company as GE having made Rome its home. Now those economic developers instead get to point to a hazardous waste site until "Kingdom Come"?

THE HEALTH and environmental risks of PCBs are in some dispute and their accurate assessment and resolution can thus well take considerable time. On the other hand, the economic impact of what has occurred would seem to be much more definite and easier to assess and resolve in a satisfactory manner. GE didn't simply close a major plant and move the production to Mexico. It closed a plant and left Rome with a hazardous waste problem and a potentially tarnished image. Reaching a satisfactory conclusion of the PCB issue is going to be a step-by-step process. The fate and future of the former plant site should be the first step.

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